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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DOHA 000156

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SUBJECT: PEACEFUL PROTEST AGAINST UK DENIAL OF VISA FOR SHEIKH AL-QARADAWI IN DOHA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael A. Ratney,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: A peaceful demonstration of about 300 people took place February 20 in front of the British Embassy in Doha. The demonstrators protested the denial of a visa for Qatari-based Islamic scholar Sheikh Yusef Al-Qaradawi to travel to the UK. The protesters lambasted the "hypocrisy" of the UK Government which, they maintained, on one hand preaches freedom and democracy and on the other hand refuses the entry of a Muslim who "only wishes to meet with other Muslims and to attend conferences." Contrary to public statements that Al-Qaradawi was not notified of the reason for his visa's denial, the British Embassy told Poloff he was denied entry because the Government of the UK "disagrees with his public statements on terrorism and his homophobic and anti-Semitic views" and Al-Qaradawi was fully informed of this. End Summary.

¶12. (U) Advertisements in local newspapers February 19 announced that a "silent protest" would be held on February 20 spotlighting the refusal of the British Embassy in Doha to issue a medical visa (see para 7) for Doha-based Islamic scholar Sheikh Yusef Al-Qaradawi. The advertisement noted that the protest was "against the continuous and vicious campaign directed at the pioneer of moderation and tolerance." British charge d'affaires Roddy Drummond told the press: "We recognize people's right to protest peacefully and we have no problem about that." Drummond noted that the denial "was a decision by the British Government and the reason was conveyed to Qaradawi."

¶13. (SBU) The protest was organized by Al-Qaradawi's "Solidarity Committee." Members of the committee are not publicly identified, but its most prominent members are former Qatari Justice Minister Dr. Najeeb Al-Nuaimi and Sheikh Mohiyuddin Quradaghi, an Islamic scholar and professor at Qatar University, who is a close associate of Al-Qaradawi.

As requested, protestors began to gather in an area some distance from the British Embassy at 15:00 local time.

¶14. (U) Before leading the Asser prayer, Quradaghi delivered a speech to the gathering crowd arguing that the beneficiaries of the British Government's decision were "extremists on both sides." He said the protest was symbolic in nature and represented the views of both Qatars and expatriates. He stated that the protest was in support of a principle, not a person. "We are here to support justice and fairness called on by Western democracies. You cannot punish someone for his opinions and it seems the UK, the mother of all democracies, dropped its principles at the first test," he declared. He added that both the UK and the U.S. had repeatedly failed the test of tolerance and freedom of expression during the past few years when tested by the Arab and Muslim sides." He questioned why Muslims in both countries are denied the right to hear directly from Muslim scholars of all nations and

nationalities. After the prayer, Quradaghi directed the protesters to line up and march to the British Embassy.

¶15. (SBU) An Embassy FSN observing the protest estimated the crowd numbered between 300 and 350, approximately 70 of whom were women and children. Based on their dress and dialect, a large majority of the group were Arab expatriates, primarily from Egypt, including a sizable contingent of Qatar University professors, lawyers and Imams. Qatari participants were estimated to number fewer than 10. The protesters held banners in Arabic and English that read: "Mr. Brown, why are you rejecting tolerance and dialogue?" and "Yes for freedom of movement, no for discrimination of movement."

¶16. (U) Although the protest was billed as "silent," once the group reached the front gate of the British Embassy, women in the crowd began to shout slogans. The men joined in chanting: "Be fair and don't follow Tony Blair;" "Be fair with Muslims;" and "Justice now, justice now, no East, no West, Qaradawi is always fair."

¶17. (U) On behalf of the protesters, Najeeb Al-Nuaimi, escorted by police officers, walked into the UK Embassy and delivered a petition to the British DCM urging London to reconsider its decision. After exiting the Embassy, Al-Nuaimi told the crowd that the DCM had assured him that the petition would be sent to the British Foreign Office and the petitioners would receive a reply. According to Al-Nuaimi, Al-Qaradawi was never informed of the reason for the denial of his visa. Contrary to protest announcements noting that the visa was sought for medical reasons, Al-Nuaimi said the purpose of Al-Qaradawi's visit to the UK was to meet Muslims and attend conferences. He lamented that

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Qatar had allowed the establishment of Christian churches, despite some Qataris' reservations, but that London could not tolerate one moderate Muslim scholar to visit for a few days. He called on the Government of Qatar to adopt a principle of reciprocity with the UK by preventing British priests from preaching in Qatar's churches. At precisely 16:00, Quradaghi told protesters that their mission was complete and that they were invited to attend Friday's prayer at Omar Ibn Al-Khatib mosque to listen to him speak about the incident. The crowd dispersed peacefully.

¶18. (C) The British Poloff told us February 21 that Al-Qaradawi was definitely informed of the reason for the denial of his visa. While noting that it is the policy of the Foreign Office not to make such information public, he shared with us that his visa application was denied because, "the Government of the UK disagrees with Al-Qaradawi's statements about terrorism and because of his homophobic and anti-Semitic views." He also noted that the UK, under its laws, may "exclude anyone who supports or incites violence and terrorism."

¶19. (C) Comments: We believe the British Embassy, in welcoming this peaceful protest and giving Al-Qaradawi's supporters a fair hearing, underscored the usual absence of peaceful protests in Qatar. We also note that only a handful of Qatari citizens attended the protest, as the vast majority of protesters appeared to be resident expatriates. By deliberately concealing the reason for the visa's denial, Al-Qaradawi was seeking to garner public support for playing the "religion card" against government policies of the U.S. and UK.

RATNEY